



## TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT



The Haitian community in Tallahassee pitched in to help the crash victims get back to their families off or last week's bus crash in Wallula.

### Volunteers bridge language barrier for crash victims

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As the twisted metal still smoldered in Wallula County on July 2, Leon County government, local hospitals, non-profits and Tallahassee's Haitian community pitched in.

Soon, more than a dozen people, inured when their bus ran a flashing red light and collided with a semi truck, would be released from local hospitals. The initial, mostly of Haitian descent, came out of the hospital with nothing. Their possessions were burned up. They were unable to recover their belongings.

The worst crash, Wallula County Sheriff Charlie Cress had seen in his time on the force, killed four people and left dozens more hospitalized at Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare and Capital Regional Medical Center. Helping the shaken victims once they were released from the hospital would prove to be an extraordinary test for local disaster relief organizations.

By 11 a.m. on the morning of the crash, Leon County Chapter of the American Red Cross on Easterwood Drive, knowing there would be a language gap, some one who could speak Creole. It wasn't a handful of found Creole speakers through the Haitian Cultural Club, a Tallahassee-based group of about 100 members.

Altogether, about 17 Creole speakers came to the temporary shelter within hours of the crash. There they helped translate between the victims and a volunteer nurse. They also chatted with the injured about their families and told them their food and clothes.

John E. Benjamins, the 22-year-old president of the Haitian Cultural Club and a Florida A&M University student, was born in Haiti and moved to West Palm Beach when she was 5. She first learned about the crash at about 9 a.m., when one of her fellow members called her. Word spread quickly and members of the club started showing up.

Sharon Zylke, executive director of the Capital Area Chapter of the American Red Cross, estimates about 30 total volunteers from a wide range of organizations stepped up to help.

About 15 of the victims stayed at the temporary shelter the night of the crash. The next afternoon, the South Florida, dropping them off at their homes in South Florida and West Palm Beach. The last victim was dropped off at 3:30 a.m.

"All they wanted to do is go home," said Julie Smith, the Salvation Army's community relations coordinator. "To be able to get them home was a really big deal for us."

The efforts of Leon County and volunteers haven't ended. Leon County set up its own system of making families safe. Each crash victim released from the hospital will be assigned a county employee, who will help them find a way back home. The county has even put up the money to help pay for the victims' transportation. Those costs already have been recovered by the community donations.

